

# OpenTheo

## #203 Christian unity, denominations and the modern Church (Replay)

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In this replay from the Archives we're diving into questions of Church Unity, Denominations, Worship and questions facing the Modern Church. Is attending church essential for being a Christian? What shapes our theology of worship? How do we navigate our denominational choices? For prize draws, bonus content and to ask a question sign up at [www.askntwright.com](http://www.askntwright.com) For Tom's free video course on The Lord's Prayer <http://ntwrightonline/askntwright> Subscribe and Rate the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast on your podcast provider! For prize draws, bonus content and to ask a question sign up at [www.askntwright.com](http://www.askntwright.com) For Tom's free video course on The Lord's Prayer <http://ntwrightonline/askntwright> More from Unbelievable? • More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up here: <https://premierunbelievable.com> • For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live> • For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/training> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

## Transcript

Truly understanding your identity is a deeply personal journey and discovering who you are starts with knowing where you came from. This applies to us as individuals as well as collectively. Though it's popular to question the existence of a historic Adam and Eve, did they truly exist? Or were they merely archetypes? The truth is, much of our uniqueness as humans only makes sense in the light of the Genesis account of creation.

These questions and more are explored at length. Welcome to this replay of Ask NT Wright Anything where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of Tom Wright. Answering questions submitted by you, the listener.

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to updates, free bonus videos and e-books. That's [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. Welcome, welcome.

I'm Justin Briley. Sitting down once again with New Testament scholar, and prolific author, Tom Wright. And the show brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online.

And today we're turning to your questions on the church, worship and unity. Without further ado, let's get into this week's edition of the show. It's my pleasure to sit down.

Every couple of weeks at least with Tom Wright to get his thoughts on all kinds of questions that come in from listeners. And today, the theme that we've gathered the questions under is around the church and worship and unity and those sorts of issues. Lots of different questions coming in on this.

Tom, would you say you've seen in your lifetime a lot of movement in the whole area of church unity, churches willing to work together, different denominations and so on? Actually, I have, and it's been very exciting and encouraging. I grew up in a market town in Central Northumberland where there were two or three Anglican church buildings, but it was one parish. But then there were two quite different Methodist churches, which eventually they joined together, and people, oh, they're getting together now.

There was a URC church, which then was a congregational church, and then there was a Presbyterian church. They finally got together. Now, some would say cynically, well, that's because they were all shrinking and they could only afford one building between them.

But I think there's more to it than that. I think as people were mobile and as broadcasting happened and people sort of bumped into each other, whether in the shop or in the golf club or whatever, why are we different from them? And a lot of those differences went back 100 or 200 years, certainly the different types of Methodism did. And people were saying, sorry, we're all seeing the same here.

We're having basically the same stuff. What's this all about? And also, some of the old prejudices have simply gone out of the window. When I was a boy, I remember I had a good friend at school who was a Roman Catholic, and he came with me once from school back to my home.

And one of my natural ways of walking home from school was through a large Anglican churchyard. And he courteously excused himself and explained that his mother had said that he shouldn't walk through an Anglican churchyard because he was Roman Catholic. Hard to imagine that happening today.

Exactly. And likewise, we had virtually nothing to do with the big Catholic church on the other side of town. Didn't know the name of the priest or anything.

Now, that is almost unthinkable. And it's had to not quite unthinkable. But when I was Bishop of Durham, my two closest ecumenical partners really were the Roman Catholic Bishop on the one hand and the leader of the House Church movement on the other.

And that was wonderful. And then we had very good relations with the Methodists and with the URCs and with the Baptists. There was even a small contingent of Syrian Orthodox in one corner of the Dases.

And there was a strong sense that we're all about the same thing. And that out there, there's a secular world which doesn't like us and doesn't understand us. And we just need each other.

And particularly the way that some of the Roman Catholic leaders have embraced the ecumenical movement. I think of Cardinal Walter Casper, a great theologian in his own right, written some wonderful books about Jesus, about mercy, et cetera. He led for many years the Roman office that was dealing with other churches.

And he produced a book called Harvesting the Fruits when he retired, which is a collection of all the agreements, the Roman Methodist agreements, the Roman Orthodox agreements, the Roman Anglican agreements, discussing the issues. Basically, including, come on guys, we all believe in the Trinity, we all do this, we all believe that. And then it's a matter of, so why are we still in our separate silos? And I think that's where we've now got.

We've come a long way. And I often find in my experience that very often people who are choosing, say, if they go to a new town, which church will I attend? They're not really looking at the denominational label. They're simply looking at the flavour, if you like.

Does this sort of, do I prefer to go to the more lively sort of church? But you might find that equally within an Anglican church, within somewhere else and whatever it is you know. And I know this happens particularly in America. I have a lot of American friends who, oh well, you know, we moved from Chicago to somewhere else.

And so we really liked the preaching of the Presbyterian church, so we went there. And actually, it's not a big deal. Right.

Well, let's turn to some of the questions that have come in from listeners. One in Oakley asks this very simple question. First of all, says I'm finding the programme so helpful.

Thank you. Now, this person says, people say, I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. How would you reply to this? Well, if somebody on a desert island finds a Bible, reads it, discovers that Jesus is a living presence and that he or she wants to worship this Jesus, I guess that can happen.

You don't have to go to church to have a living place. I have heard a wonderful joke on

that front. You've probably heard it too.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. You end up with two churches. The one who goes to the one who doesn't go to.

I know, I know. There are variants on that. I've heard Jonathan's hacks tells us similar thing about synagogues.

Yeah, every religion has it. Yes, yes. I think so.

But there's so much about very early Christianity, which is what I basically study in the New Testament, which makes it clear that Christianity is a team sport. Interestingly, when you contrast Christian virtue with pagan virtue, say, Aristotle. Aristotle's virtues are all for the individual.

I'm going to be courageous. I'm going to be noble. I'm going to be just, et cetera, et cetera.

I'm going to be a leader of my community. The Christian virtues, things like humility, charity, generosity, et cetera, you require a community to practice these. And so there's a sense in which when the spirit of Jesus takes somebody over and when they are responding to the spirit of Jesus, this will naturally become a common all thing.

No. So it isn't the case that here's this organization, and wouldn't it be better if you, as a lonely, an enlightenment individual, stayed aloof from it. That's a caricature.

Obviously, it does sometimes feel like that. But actually, we all need one another. We are none of us complete.

Hence Paul's amazing image of the body of Christ that we are none of us, anything like sufficient. That's why, I mean, for me as a scholar, when I write something about a passage in the New Testament, I want my fellow scholars to look at it and say, Tom, you've missed this text or you've misinterpreted this word. We need one another.

I don't think I'm getting it all right. I need that feedback. Likewise in the church.

And often when I've lectured on what the Kingdom of God might mean in the world tomorrow, that sort of thing, young people will come up to me and say, I see this amazing vision of the Kingdom of God. What should I be doing? And I say, well, you cannot possibly do more than a tiny fraction of the tasks that need to be done. You need to be part of a fellowship in which the fellowship as a whole is saying, okay, prayerfully, we are committed to all these different things.

Who is going to be good at this one, who is going to be called to that one, et cetera? And that should be something that's happening worldwide as well. And then you see the church as this body with many limbs and organs out there in the world doing its thing.

Imperfect, obviously, as it does that.

But I often find when I meet people who have, let's say, given up on church because they got hurt, they didn't suit them. I often think, well, that's part of perhaps the challenge is to learn patience, graciousness, how to get along with people who annoy us. That is part of the very idea of the whole thing.

It's not simply there for our personal enjoyment. And I remember when I was a student, all sorts of sermons with the usual slogan, you know, if you find a perfect church, don't join it because you'll spoil it. But yes, I think with the wisdom of old age, I sometimes think that God gives us churches in order to teach us patients.

Certainly as a priest and as a bishop, certainly sometimes how it feels. Equally, there are so many times as a priest and as a bishop, when you come away from a meeting or from hearing what somebody's doing in the drug rehab or whatever it might be, or from a great service, and just think, I am so richly blessed to be a part of a community that's doing all this stuff, which I could never begin to do by myself. Christian, in Timisouara, I think I've pronounced that correctly, in Romania, asks, what should be the undergirding theology of worship that shapes any one particular church's worship life and practice? Regardless of your Anglican heritage, if you were to embrace a particular Christian liturgical expression or tradition, which one would it be and why? So two questions then.

It's a good question. And coming from Romania, I mean, I remain as one of the last Eastern European countries I visited not that long ago, and I was friends just fleetingly with one of the bishops there, delightful man. And it seems to me there is a rapprochement, again, across different liturgical styles that Anglicans are more appreciative of orthodox styles and orthodox, often quite appreciative of Anglican styles.

And so I think we are learning from one another, and so I wouldn't want to answer the question in a way which implied that it's going to be either this or that, and never the train shall meet. But I do sense, and I've observed this over the years, that different temperaments naturally go for different styles of worship. Some people want more words, more intellectual content, more rational explanation.

Other people really want and need to be given the space for some stillness, for some meditative music and possibilities for times of silence. And then it's a question of, okay, so are you just looking for somewhere to be accosted in your own personality type? And actually maturity would say, well, yes, that's good, but then I also need to be joggled out of that, and to share with my brothers and sisters who are different from me. Yes, yes.

So much by not then experiencing it, however occasionally uncomfortable I might have felt. It was the process of doing that, that maybe suddenly realise there's a whole world of different expression out there. Absolutely, and I think one of the things that we've realised from the Protestant side, or many have, is that the fear of ritualism is one thing,

and there is a ritualism, but there is also a charismatic question, everyone has to raise their hands at a certain point.

And that is just as legalistic as a Catholic or a high Anglican crossing themselves. But actually what, again, I'll keep on quoting C.S. Lewis, what we do with our bodies affects everything, which is why kneeling is important. Now here's the thing, how many churches do you know now where they actually kneel regularly? There's not that many.

That's true. It went out about 20 years ago, quite suddenly, I think in the 90s. And suddenly, even though there were still kneelers, people were just sick instead.

And I want to say actually we've lost something there. Again, the late lamented Colin Slee who was Dean of Sotheke and I used to join hands on this. We didn't always agree about other things, but we both agreed that actually kneeling was good for you.

And that if you're in the presence of God Almighty then actually kneeling is the easy alternative of getting flat on your face. And simply slouching in a seat. Or doing the crouch or some people.

Or doing the crouch. But yeah, a crouch may be better than sort of sitting back if you get up. Because even in my private prayers day by day, there are certain moments when if I find that I'm sitting with my legs crossed, I just think actually that's inappropriate.

In the presence of God here. The Ask Anti-Write Anything podcast is brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and Anti-Write Online. Now, Anti-Write Online is the place where you can find all of Tom's online theology courses taught by Tom himself in video format.

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Just go to [anti-writeonline.org](http://anti-writeonline.org) forward slash ask anti-write. Before we rejoin today's episode, I need to tell you about an urgent challenge Premier Insight is facing today. As we begin this new year, \$20,000 is needed by February 29th in order to keep Premier Insight strong and financially on target.

At the outset of this new year, that couldn't be more important. As you know, all said to Christianity is in rapid decline across the United States. So many Christians feel ill-equipped to defend their faith against the angry and antagonistic rhetoric of our day.

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Thank you so much. Clay and Cambridge says something that troubles me and no one seems to know the answer to is how do we know we're in the right church or denomination. Learning the right teachings from the word with Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, Anglicans, C.A.V. And every other denomination or varying in opinion, how do we decipher if we're in the right place? I'm not sure what feels like the right place really cuts it.

My faith was so simple when younger says Clay. I love God, he loves me, but as I'm older and you try to learn and understand more, you realize all the splits. We all agree we love God, but we got it right.

So we're all divided in our terms. Anyway, so lots going on in the place. Obviously he puts a whole group of different denominations together and says, how do you know you're in the right way? Yes.

And put like that, there is no way of knowing, but then knowing is such a funny concept anyway. And the question almost sounds as though there ought to be a scientific test where you could put a coin in the slot and it would say, this is where you should be, and then you won't have to think about it anymore. And I suspect that with our present denominational chaos, we ought to feel uncomfortable.

Because after I read my big book on Paul some years ago, I was going the rounds doing conferences and so on. And people kept asking me, if some Paul could come back today, what would he be most keen to say to us? And I'm hesitatingly say, he would be horrified not just that we are disunited, but that we don't care. Because for Paul, the unity of the church is absolutely if you're not united, why would Caesar take any notice of you? If you're not united, why would anyone believe that there really is a new creation? And so he battles for church unity across some very difficult divides all the time in every single letter.

When the easy thing would have probably been just to let people do their different thing and not really communicate with each other. Exactly. But the whole part of the whole

point of Romans, not the whole point, but part of the whole point coming together in Romans 14 and 15, is that you may with one heart and mind and voice glorify the God and Father of Jesus.

Yes, you come from this tradition. Yes, you come from that synagogue community, so you're worried about this. But here's how you learn the humility of Christ to come together and worship together.

And that's the sign to Caesar that Jesus is Lord and he isn't. It really, really is. So I want to say we ought to be uncomfortable and that probably the right thing to do is to start where you are and as you pray about where you are, if you feel increasingly uncomfortable, as people sometimes do, then pray, look around, see what the alternatives are.

Now, this is easy if you live in a big town with lots of different churches. It's quite difficult if you live in a smaller town 15 miles away from anywhere else with only one real active church, where if you then get somebody who's preaching really drives you up the wall, are you going to drive 15 miles? Well, that might depend whether you have children who need to go to Sunday school. Some people will choose to go to a church that they feel they'd really rather not, but they feel if everyone doesn't go, then it'll be all the worse.

So these are hard choices that people make. And when I retire, which please God won't be too long coming, there will be a question. What are we doing Sunday morning? Absolutely.

It's interesting just to come back quickly to that question that Clay does here mention at the beginning of that list, Jehovah's Witnesses. Yes. Are there some sort of doctrinal issues, e.g. the being a Trinitarian church? I wasn't going to comment on that, but yes, it was rather odd to have JW's at the front there.

But of course, many people looking from the outside, see Joe's, written as Mormons. Yeah. It's all one and the same.

And often in America, I've seen people lining up Catholics, Protestants and Jews, as though these are three of the same sorts of things. And most Jewish people would say, no, that's not how it is. But so the different public perceptions are very odd.

So yes, I would say, please make sure it's Trinitarian, please make sure that the Bible is read and taught, please make sure that it has the Eucharist, the bread-breaking, call it what you will, somewhere in the center of its life. Now, that might be once a year, it might be once a week, but that's great. Yeah.

There are some distinctives which kind of have to be in place. Sure, sure. Yes.

Coming back to the sort of idea of ecumenism and especially on a global level, Anna in



Brazil, asks, many Christian leaders have been talking about a potential revival in Christianity around the world, bringing Episcopalian Catholics and Reformed Christians together. So what is the balance between striving for unity and a critical attitude towards the limitations of each denomination or theological tradition? And Anna says, wouldn't it be quite insensitive to overlook deep differences for the sake of common goals? What's your thought in that? It would, it would. But this is where the crucial thing is, what is the common core? And Ron Williams did a lecture in Rome some years ago, think of 2009, where he, as it were, laid down this challenge.

We know we agree on the Trinity, the resurrection, incarnation, atonement, we all invoke the Holy Spirit. So what's to stop us getting together? And if I think his point was then about the doctrines concerning Mary, that if you say, well, you can't give up your Marian things and we don't want to take them on, is that a difference we could live with? Because within some Catholic teaching, it wouldn't be a difference you could live with. You've got to take the whole package, although many Roman Catholics will say privately that actually they'd be happy if that wasn't a necessary thing.

So I think we come back to those same questions. How do you tell the differences, the difference between the differences that make a difference and the differences that don't make a difference? But we ought to, those are not easy questions, but if we were at least working at them, raising those questions, in that way, we might get somewhere. And so I want to say, yeah, there was a theologian taught at King's London and before that in Oxford, Eric Maskell, in a previous generation.

And somebody said, we in the Church of England don't know why we have deacons, because it's just the first year of somebody being ordained. So why do we just make them all pretty straight away? And Maskell quoted, and this is apropos, the different bits that we don't quite understand, he said he wants to talk to a Swiss doctor who said to him, your English doctors don't know what tonsils are for, and so they take them out. I do not know what tonsils are for, and so I leave them out.

That's a great line. That maybe there was a reason for that. Maybe there wasn't, but maybe there was.

And maybe it's the path of humility to say, let's learn from each other. Let's finish with a final sort of pastoral sort of question. Someone who's just at the beginning, I suppose, of looking ahead to pastoring Christians in churches.

Matt in Durham, North Carolina says, what encouragement would you have for a first year seminarian? I assume that is Matt himself, who is grasped by a vision of the kingdom come. But is wrestling with what that vision will look like in predominantly rural churches in the American South that can be resistant to change, and I suspect there are similar churches in the UK that might be of the same. Matt, if you want some examples of churches that resist change, I could introduce you to several.

Famously, it's in one of the books about John Habgood, sometime Archbishop of York, when he arrived at some parish and met the church warden, discovered the church warden, and had been there for sort of 35 years and said, you must have seen a lot of changes during your time. Yes, he said, and I opposed them all. And I understand that.

I came from a very traditional church, and my father was a church warden, and he didn't oppose all the changes. But there's a sense of, this is where we're at home. Like if you introduce a new liturgy suddenly, then people feel as though they're not wearing the right clothes, and that's a cruel thing to do to people when they've come in humility to worship God.

And so if you're going to make changes, you have to have a strategy for how to do that. So if it was, for instance, a new style of liturgy, modern words or whatever, you might want to have a whole lent course where for six weeks, you'd have people on Wednesday evenings looking at here are some options. This is how some people elsewhere do it.

This is what we think now. And make sure that the key movers and shakers in the church are part of that, and not standing aloof. That's really difficult.

But it's why, for instance, the Casio movement, which my wife and I met when we were in Montreal, insisted that people could only come from a parish when the Bishop of the Darcy sort of already been to a Casio, so it wouldn't be a breakaway movement, and that lay people in a parish could only go if the parish priest had already been, etc., etc. And in the traditional form, wives would only go if they were close. You mentioned this in the previous podcast.

Sorry, but no, it's fine, but no, it illustrates the point. It illustrates the point that change can happen, but if it's ran through without explanation, this can be very cruel. And I think that it's good to take people with you.

It's vital to take people with you. I've seen churches, I must confess, where I've seen good examples where changes happen and bad examples. The difference for me has been the ability of that leader to bring people with them.

To bring people along with, yes, yes. And that means the slow, prayerful work of getting to know the people. And it probably happening on a longer time scale, that you would prefer.

That's right. Parish priest comes in, or no minister comes in and says, okay, a couple of weeks time, we're going to be doing this. Excuse me.

And there is such a thing as leadership, but I think I may have said this to you in a previous podcast, in that case, the Thomas the Tank Engine principle. No, you haven't. Tell us the Thomas the Tank Engine principle.

Because my name is Tom. When I was a little boy, it was when the first Thomas the Tank Engine books were coming out in the late 40s, early 50s. And one of the stories, which naturally I remember vividly, is Thomas being very excited and steaming away out to the station, and getting a mild to down the road, thinking this is fun.

And then the driver looks back and the carriages weren't coupled on. And they're still in the station, he has to go back and get them. And so that's always been, for me, quite an important Thomas story.

Britain by a minister noted that. Of course, yes. And I'm sure, I mean, quite a lot of his stuff was rather quaint allegories.

From pastoral life. I'm sure it was. I hope that's helped in some way, Matt in Durham.

And all the very best with your forthcoming ministry. Tom, thank you very much as well for sharing time with us to talk through church issues, unity, worship, and such like, look forward to another edition of the programme in a couple of weeks time. And we will meet again soon.

Yes, Steve. Thank you. You've been listening to the Ask, Enty, Write, Anything podcast.

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